

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 3

Turn Around to See GOD - CHARLES GRAY

WHEN I first met Charles Gray, he was sprawled at a barroom table getting drunk on "scats," the cheapest drink on Skid Row. His face was blotched with dirt, his brown hair dangled greasily over one eye, and his clothes were torn. But he was handsome, in his early thirties. He looked over at me blearily and shouted to the bartender:

"Hey! Keep that holier-than-thou Christer out of here."

What was I, an executive of a large Chicago Loop piano company, doing in a Skid Row dive? I was pursuing my hobby - the hobby of concern for the homeless and embittered men who shuffled up and down the streets around the corner from my factory. Part of my hobby was serving as a member of the board of directors of the Pacific Garden Mission.

The other part was helping individual men for whom I felt a special concern. The night that I met Charles Gray I had stopped at a deadly dive called "Frank's Place," looking for an elderly dope addict.

"Keep that holier-than-thou Christer outa here!"

I turned to look at the man again and realized quickly that although a sleeve was half torn out of his jacket, the clothes he was wearing were not ragged. And even though a thin line of saliva was coming out of the corner of his bloated lips, good breeding and culture were written on his face. Leaning against his table were two battered crutches, and I saw also that this man had only one leg.

In his bloodshot eyes I saw great intelligence, but I also saw more bitterness and deep-down confusion than I had ever seen in the eyes of a man. This was no long-time, end-of-the-road wino. There was something different about this young fellow, and I had to find out what it was. I walked over and sat down at his table.

"You look like you'd have an answer to an honest question, fellow," I said. "What are you and what are you living for?"

"That's two questions." He was very drunk. "Mr. Schopenhauer, the great philosopher and apostle of pessimism, answered them both for me. Who am I? I don't know. What am I here for? I'm sure I don't know."

He also added that I could take my little tin GOD and beat it, but I didn't, and we became friends. I liked him from the first few minutes of our conversation. There was something very likable about Charles Gray, even when he was drunk. And he told me that I spoke his language.

I stayed in that bar with him for an hour. During that hour, the lonely, embittered young man told me his life story.

He had learned to drink when he was about fourteen. His father, a pharmacist in a town in Michigan, used to send him to the back room for liquor when his friends dropped in during prohibition.

As an adolescent seeking independence, he had rebelled at anything that held him down. At thirty, he was still an emotional adolescent. But he was brilliant and well-educated. In fact, he had graduated from the University of Iowa and had planned on a medical career. But wanderlust and rebellion drove him to the bottle. One night, he told me, he fell under a moving freight train, and that was how he had lost his right leg.

So he had chucked everything, come to Chicago, and taken a room on Skid Row. Now he was sitting in a cheap dive, telling a total stranger his life story. But I could tell that this was more than drunken garrulousness. I could tell that my concern had gotten through to him, and finally out of the depths of his desperate need he asked for help.

"Now look, doc - I'm gonna call you 'doc' because you remind me of one of my old professors - look, doc, old Frank over there's got me hooked." He pointed in the general direction of the bartender. "He knows I'm sunk without liquor. So he got me to write to my mother back in Michigan to send me a check for fifteen dollars a week and send it here, made out to him. He feeds me and drinks me for that. But I never get any of the money myself, and I can't get away from here without money."

I could hardly believe that any mother would knowingly send checks to the proprietor of a den like that.

"I told her he was a fine guy, taking care of me," Charles seemed to sense my incredulity. "But maybe if a guy like you writes to her and gives her all this God-malarkey you seem to believe in and tells her who you are, maybe she'd send you the checks."

This was what I had been hoping for. It was some small response to my concern. It was a sign that the boy truly wanted to be different. I told him I'd do it. I'd write to his mother, and from then on she could send the checks to my office.

I know that Frank, the bartender, could have cheerfully cut my throat when Charles Gray hobbled out of his dive with me that day. But he only glared and swished the counter angrily with a rag, and I helped Charles up the steps and out into the sunlight.

I took Charles out to my own neighborhood, found him a nice room that afternoon, and then brought in some supper.

The two of us settled down to do some more talking but, as the liquor began to wear off, the young man's nervousness increased and he grew more and more unresponsive.

I tried hard not to be persistent. I assured him that I wasn't going to force my religion - or GOD - on him. "I'm not just interested in your soul. I'm interested in you, as a man," I remember saying. "I don't have a son of my own and right now what I want for us is friendship."

"Yeah?" Charles said lethargically.

"Yes. GOD has already begun His own pursuit of you. And even though you may keep on trying to run away from Him, He'll catch up with you one day, and then you'll see I'm right."

"Why don't you prove GOD to me?" Charles asked.

As we talked, Charles had been sitting with his back to the window. Now as I faced him, I could see beyond him a flaming sunset, fanning out across the west. "I could describe that sunset to you, Charles, but until you turned around and looked for yourself, you couldn't be absolutely sure it was there."

Charles didn't turn. "You know, I like the way your mind works, doc," he said.

"Then turn around and look at the sunset, son, and it'll prove itself."

"Very neat, very neat. Turn around and look at GOD and there He is." He turned and stared out at the window pane.

"When I look, all I see is more Charles Gray staring back at me and looking for a reason for being alive."

I could see it was time for me to go. "I like the way your mind works, too, fellow," I told him and stood up. "Get some rest. Don't worry about a job for a few days. But think about that sunset after I'm gone. I'll be back tomorrow after work."

For a week, I went every day to see Charles Gray in the room which I rented for him. I wrote to his mother, and the first checks with her signature arrived at my office. Charles, in his room, was drying out, staying sober, and regaining some of his strength. He was grateful for my concern, polite enough, but I could tell that he had hardened his mind and heart against any talk about GOD.

I grew to love this boy as though he were my own son. And it became difficult indeed for me not to try to press GOD upon him. I knew that a complete surrender of that wounded ego, that rebellious self, into the hands of JESUS CHRIST was his only hope. Yet I knew too the danger of rushing ahead of GOD, trying to do His work for Him. So I just loved the boy and let him know it. I knew very well that if I tried to rush him over to a service at the Pacific Garden Mission, he would rebel.

I did what I felt was the next best thing. I called on my good friend, Mrs. Clarke, who with her husband had been founder of the Mission. I told her the story of how I came across this handsome young drifter and asked her to help if she could. It was clear his story interested her as much as it had me.

"Of course this boy interests me," Mrs. Clarke said that day. "But he will require handling, my friend. Remember there is nothing so relentless nor loving as the pursuit of GOD. A surrender to the love of GOD can take place anywhere, you know. And if this does happen somewhere else, be sure you bring Charles here to the Mission afterward. I want to meet this fine young man of yours."

After work the next day I went as usual directly from my office to the room where Charles was staying. But only silence answered the knock on his door. The landlady was vague. He had gone out for cigarettes that morning, and she wasn't sure whether or not he had come back.

My heart sank, and for a moment my faith went down with it. But I hailed a cab and headed immediately for Skid Row. In one evil-smelling dive after another I searched for my friend. Finally, on Wells Street, in a place that matched Frank's Place for stale smell and filthy inhabitants, I found Charles. His face was still clean but I knew at a glance that this was not the man I had left the night before. From the shadow of a corner booth, he glared up at me as though he hated me. "Go away, doc."

"All right, son," I said, even though my heart was breaking.

"I'll go away, but you can't get away from JESUS CHRIST. Even here. He's right there with you."

"Okay, so He's here. I can't get rid of what I can't see, but I can get rid of you. Now beat it." With pathetic defiance, he drained his glass.

"Charles, you can get rid of yourself too."

He leered up at me. He knew so well how to hurt me. "Maybe I will. Maybe I'll kill myself."

"You know what I mean."

"Sure I do. I wish - I were dead."

Now I was talking directly to the agony in his soul, not to the sneering lips. "If you were dead to yourself, you could live again in CHRIST. If you were dead to your own last nature, you'd be alive in CHRIST."

"Get out a here, you Christer."

So I went. He wouldn't leave with me. But I did find out that he had a cheap room over this Wells Street bar. I was able to check on him every day. Yet I kept away from him. It was the hardest thing I ever did. But I knew I had to trust GOD to do His work in this way.

One agonizing week went by. During that week, I prayed with high faith and low faith, but I kept on praying. And on the eighth night after I had seen Charles, the telephone in my apartment rang.

The voice that filtered through to me choked out its words between moans. "Doc - Charles - in awful shape - verge of d.t.'s - know all the symptoms - can you get here - take a walk with me." The receiver on the other end clattered down, but I was on my way to the squalid block on Wells Street.

The man I found had been reduced to a pathetic creature.

That methodically trained mind of his knew so well that physical horror was in store for him. He knew that physical exercise might ward off delirium tremens, but because he was so terribly sick from the week of constant drinking, even to walk with his crutches was torture.

But we walked, up and down Chicago's Loop. My heart ached to help him in his terrible suffering but all I could do was to be there with him. Past the secondhand stores, past the pawn shops, even past the taverns, he hobbled, and I was beside him.

Then I saw a hideous change come over him. He began to shake violently. His trembling hands clutched at my arm. "Doc, I can't stand this," he sobbed. "We've got to get inside where people can't make fun of me."

I knew what was happening. But the only hope was to keep on walking. "Nobody's making fun of you, boy. Just keep on walking."

"Those two women, they're pointing at me. Laughing." Suddenly, his sob was a shriek. "Look out, doc!" He was dodging back and forth. I grabbed him to keep him from falling down.

Leaning on me for support, he covered his eyes with a trembling arm. "Is it gone?" he asked. "Is what gone?"

"That - that big black train - snorting out smoke and steam and coming down the sidewalk. Did it go on by?"

Somehow, I got him inside a nearby drug store. From the store I made a call to my own doctor, who came immediately. Together we took the boy to a big hospital on the west side of Chicago. He seemed to calm down there, and when I left he was sitting up, having a nine-o'clock snack with the doctors and nurses.

But in the morning at five o'clock, my phone rang again. It was the hospital, informing me that they were unequipped to handle my friend. In the middle of the night he had run out of his room, broken the equipment in two operating rooms, and beaten up two interns. I was responsible and I would have to get him at once.

At the hospital, in the early morning stillness, the doctor who talked to me sounded professionally regretful.

"Sorry - to call you back. But it was - uh - absolutely necessary. We finally got him down on an iron cot and strapped him to it. He's got enough canvas straps around him to hold a panther. We gave him sedation about two hours ago, but he still looks wild. I can't promise what he'll do when we let him loose. You do - uh understand the risk?"

"The boy means a lot to me," I told the doctor flatly. "I'll loose the straps myself."

"I think somebody else should be there with you."

"No. He trusts me." We were at the door of the room, and the doctor stood aside. I paused, calling to mind the Charles with whom I'd labored down the concrete torture path yesterday afternoon, not the Charles who had hated me in the Wells Street bar. Then I went in.

Charles was lying on a bare iron cot, lashed about with straps.

He could move his head, however, and I searched his eyes for some sign of what he might do when I reached out toward him.

"Hello, Charles," I said softly. There was no sound as he studied me, but his eyes were steady. "I'm going to take off those straps." We both waited. Then I went on. "What are you going to do when you can get off that cot?"

There was a long pause. A nerve under his eye twitched, and the corners of his lips twisted downward. But his eyes were honest. "Anything you say, doc. Anything you say."

I loosened the straps. He took my hand gratefully and together we went out of the hospital. Our next stop was a sanitarium for alcoholics. In the cab, Charles slumped into a corner weakly. He was sick and helpless and seemed at that moment to be completely trusting and calm.

But as we stood at the front desk of the sanitarium, reading over the regulation committal paper which requested permission for the patient to be put into a padded cell if necessary, Charles whirled about. With one big, strong hand, he grabbed me by the throat and drew back the other fist to smash me full in the face.

"Put me in a padded cell!" he roared. "You lousy Christer. I'll kill you!" I tried to fight him off but I was powerless against him. I kicked at his crutches, but I felt my own legs slipping - - slipping . . .

Suddenly his hand was wrenched away and, as I caught at the counter, I saw a burly attendant hit him under the chin and then toss him over his shoulder like a bag of corn, disappearing with him up a short flight of stairs.

Later I learned that Charles was locked in a padded cell within two minutes of the time he had attacked me.

Sanitarium authorities told me that I could visit Charles in three days, and not before.

During those three days, I lived in torment, imagining the agonies that Charles was going

through, sick, desperate, alone in that padded cell. I had failed to help him.

But I wanted to keep grasping at some shred of faith that GOD would not fail. So I spent most of my after-work hours at the Pacific Garden Mission, sharing my concern with Mrs. Clarke. And she, in turn, shared it with GOD. I shall never forget how intensely she prayed for Charles during those three days of waiting.

" . . . We pray that JESUS CHRIST may become so real to that boy as he suffers alone there in that padded cell . . . He's beyond our help here. We leave Charles up to You."

The three days passed. At the hospital, with anxiety and eagerness, I started to climb the short flight of stairs up which the attendant had carried Charles three nights before. At the desk they had said I'd find him in Room 24. But as I looked up the stairs, I saw him standing there at the top, staring down at me.

"I've been waiting for you, doc." Those were his only words. I followed him as he swung along on those battered crutches down the corridor. What was going on in his mind? He stopped before an open door and I looked in to see a small, square room, with its only window barred.

"Step in, doc."

This was a padded cell. Only three days had passed since this man had tried to murder me, but I went into the cell ahead of him. I'm not sure what I expected but as I turned quickly in an instinctive gesture of self-protection, I was completely surprised by the smile on his face.

As he stood there in the doorway of that dismal cell, Charles Gray smiled at me as I'd never seen him smile before. It was a healthy smile, filled with honest regard for me. Then he held out his hand, and I took it.

"How do you like my church, doc?" he said.

I looked around uneasily, and my confusion must have been clear to him.

"Doc, GOD never has been closer to me in a church than He was that second night in this padded cell. He tracked me, right in this door, doc. Just like you said He'd do. When I came to and found out I'd tried to kill you - you, the guy who'd helped me, my best friend - well, JESUS CHRIST had me. I reached out for Him. They had me locked in here, but they didn't have Him locked out. He was right here."

I remembered Mrs. Clarke's prayers. I remembered the first night I had seen Charles in Frank's Place. I remembered everything, but all I could say was, "I like the way your mind works, boy."

"Once you said that if I'd turn around, He'd prove Himself to me. Remember, the sunset out the window? I liked that, doc, and I never forgot it. And finally, His pull got so strong, I had to turn around. And there He was."

And there was Charles Gray, standing before me as a changed man. He left the sanitarium and he stayed away from liquor. I never saw a more complete transformation of any man. It was quick

and it was total.

In the power of JESUS CHRIST, he not only stayed off Skid Row, but he grew up emotionally.

He found a place in the business world and he married and established a stable home and family. I watched it all happen and could hardly believe that this was the one-legged young wanderer who had shouted out hatred at me in the Skid Row dive. But it was all true, and eventually I was to see Charles Gray, whom I regarded almost as my own son, at the head of a successful business, there living the simplified, exciting life of a true disciple of the Lord JESUS CHRIST.

~ end of chapter 3 ~
